

Notes on the Program
By Aaron Grad

Chester [1770, rev. 1778]

WILLIAM BILLINGS

Born October 7, 1746 in Boston, Massachusetts

Died September 26, 1800 in Boston, Massachusetts

In the late 1700s, a distinctly American approach to singing church music arose in and around Boston. Rejecting the overly complicated and elitist hymn settings coming from Europe, New Englanders embraced a simpler and more forthright style of collective singing, and they flocked to singing schools where they could learn how to take part in that approachable style of four-part a cappella choir music. One of the leading figures in this musical revolution was William Billings, a tanner and self-taught composer who became a go-to “singing master” in Boston, and who published more than 300 of his own choral compositions. In his second songbook, *The Singing Master’s Assistant* from 1778, he included a revision of an earlier hymn tune known as “Chester” with new patriotic lyrics that poked fun at the British generals who were combatants in the ongoing Revolutionary War. It soon became an unofficial anthem of the fledgling nation.

Chester from New England Triptych [1956]

WILLIAM SCHUMAN

Born August 4, 1910 in New York, New York

Died February 15, 1992 in New York, New York

It’s hard to name an American musician who held more diverse roles and who had a broader impact than William Schuman (except perhaps his friend Leonard Bernstein). Until his mid-twenties, Schuman was writing popular songs that he hoped might reach Broadway, but then concert music caught his ear, and in 1935 he began teaching at Sarah Lawrence College and directing their choir while also forging his own sound as a composer. He made his biggest mark as an administrator, first leading The Juilliard School and then the newly-opened Lincoln Center while continuing to compose on the side.

When Schuman composed the *New England Triptych* in 1956, he revisited the hymns of William Billings that he had learned as a choir conductor. Schuman’s fantasy on “Chester” begins as a placid chorale (as Billings’ “Chester” was in its first version), but it soon takes on a martial flair that matches the hymn tune’s subsequent fame as an unofficial anthem of the Revolutionary War.

Piano Concerto No. 9 in E-Flat Major, K. 271 (“Jenamy”) [1777]

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

Born January 27, 1756 in Salzburg, Austria

Died December 5, 1791 in Vienna, Austria

The audiences all over Europe who had been dazzled by young Mozart, a child prodigy the likes of which the world had never seen, would have been shocked to see where he landed in his early twenties: living at home in Salzburg, working a dead-end church job alongside his impossible-to-please father, and grasping at any chance to get out. He passed the time by scrounging up local gigs entertaining rich patrons, which at least gave him opportunities to practice writing symphonies and concertos. It wasn't until he was 25 that it all paid off, when he moved to Vienna to take a chance as a freelancer.

The Piano Concerto in E-flat Major that Mozart wrote around the time of his 21st birthday represented one of his (failed) efforts to launch. He composed it for the amateur pianist Victoire Jenamy, who had passed through Salzburg that winter on her way to Paris to see her father—who happened to be the ballet master of the Paris Opera. Mozart went to Paris the next year on a job-hunting expedition, and he probably delivered the concerto himself when he paid a call to the well-connected family. Not only did Mozart come home without a job to show for it, but he tragically returned without his mother, who had accompanied him and succumbed to an illness during their travels.

In the first movement, the piano's surprising entrance after just one measure of lead-in from the orchestra creates an intimate, conversational quality. The *Andantino*, Mozart's first concerto movement in a minor key, throbs with dark, muted textures and beautifully forlorn melodies, gilded with decoration befitting an operatic soprano. The *Presto* finale, with its detour to a minuet (the quintessential French dance), is unusually substantial and affecting for a movement that by tradition was little more than an energetic closing flourish.

***A Symphony: New England Holidays* [1897-1913]**

CHARLES IVES

Born October 20, 1874 in Danbury, Connecticut

Died May 19, 1954 in New York, New York

During his childhood in Danbury, Connecticut, Charles Ives was a musical sponge who soaked up the marches, church hymns, popular songs, dance tunes, patriotic anthems, and everything else he was exposed to by his musically adventurous father, who had distinguished himself during the Civil War as the Union's youngest bandmaster. Ives became Connecticut's youngest salaried church organist at 14, and he went on to enroll at Yale, where he began composing serious art music.

After graduating in 1898, Ives moved to New York, worked various insurance jobs and played in churches on the weekends. His unorthodox career began in earnest in 1902, when he withdrew from his church jobs and any other public life in music. Externally, he

worked to become one of the most successful dealers of life insurance in the industry. Privately, he composed the first truly American body of concert music, applying pioneering techniques (often years or decades ahead of the musical establishment) and drawing liberally on the American songs and hymns he loved. When he wrote his last new piece in 1926, hardly anyone even knew his music existed.

Beginning in the 1930s, champions including Henry Cowell, Aaron Copland and Leonard Bernstein rallied behind Ives, and his music finally reached the public after decades on his shelves. He earned the Pulitzer Prize in 1947 for the Third Symphony he had composed forty years earlier, and he was able to hear performances of his major works for the first time before he died in 1954, including the first full reading that year of *A Symphony: New England Holidays*.

Before Ives had a plan for four symphonic movements that corresponded to major holidays in each season, he drafted what would become his last movement, *Thanksgiving and Forefather's Day*, based on music he had written for organ in 1897 (a prelude and postlude for a Thanksgiving service). The remaining movements were sketched out between 1909 and 1913, and in 1917 he assembled them into their current form.

Ives leaned into his boyhood memories in his "Holidays" Symphony. To begin *Washington's Birthday* (the precursor to President's Day in January), he fashioned subdued music that recalled how "there is at times a bleakness without stir but penetrating, in a New England midwinter, which settles down grimly when the day closes over the broken-hills." The raucous central section depicts a barn dance where "the village band of fiddles, fife, and horn keep up an unending 'break-down' medley, and the young folks 'salute their partners and balance corners' till midnight." Popular songs like "Camptown Races" and "Turkey in the Straw" flash by, enlivened by the percussive boinging of the Jew's harp, until the party breaks up amid strains of "Goodnight Ladies."

The second movement conjures the springtime holiday of Decoration Day, when people honored the fallen soldiers of the Civil War and decorated their graves. The somber intervals of "Taps" hark back to young Charles' own role playing that ceremonial bugle tune, and the sound of a marching band channels the parading led by Ives' father.

In Ives' description of a reveler celebrating *The Fourth of July*, "His festivities start in quiet of the midnight before, and grow raucous with the sun. Everybody knows what it's like...cornets, strings around big toes, torpedoes, church bells, lost finger, fifes, clam chowder, a prize-fight, drum-corps, burnt shins, parades (in and out of step), saloons all closed (more drunks than usual), baseball game (Danbury All-Stars vs Beaver Brook Boys), the sky-rocket over the Church steeple, just after the annual explosion sets the Town Hall on fire." This jubilant jumble of music is quintessential Ives, and he himself called it "the best thing I've written."

The final movement capturing *Thanksgiving and Forefather's Day* (the latter being the anniversary of the Pilgrims landing at Plymouth Rock, celebrated on December 22) draws on Ives' deep relationship to church music. This humble and reverent music

culminates with a distinctly American hymn penned by a Connecticut pastor: “O God,
beneath Thy guiding hand / Our exiled fathers crossed the sea, / And when they trod the
wintry strand, / With prayer and psalm they worshiped Thee.”

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